



# Rethinking fostering and adoption panels

**Dr Arlene Weekes** believes that the decisions that fostering and adoption panel members make are too often influenced by their own biases and backgrounds. She is calling for radical reform of how they are hired – and fired

Fostering and adoption panel members should be more diverse and trained beyond just knowing the National Minimum Standards, according to Dr Arlene Weekes, a social work service manager, lecturer, trainer, independent adoption vice chair and fostering panel chair.

Weekes recently completed PhD research into understanding how the attitudes and values of panel members influence their role and their recommendations.

The idea for Weekes' research began many years ago, she says, when she was chairing local authority adoption panels.

'I continued to encounter panel members and professionals who acted as though their values and personal experiences had no bearing on their judgements, as though they were a blank sheet, completely impartial,' she says. 'I was amazed by this. Surely people knew their previous experiences impact the decisions they make.'

Weekes believes class, race and faith have a large bearing on judgements, citing scenarios such as 'the assumption that applicants or carers who have a faith will inherently be more likely to have adverse reactions to same-sex issues than an atheist'. She also believes that a child's race has become 'almost unimportant' in the matching process over the past decade.

## Power imbalances

Weekes' research reveals a lack of regular, structured support and guidance for members. She also highlights that many inexperienced

members defer to the chair or more experienced members rather than having confidence to voice their own opinions.

'Panel chairs can often go unchallenged,' says Weekes. 'People need to remember the chair facilitates panel but doesn't have any more power than other panel members.'

Panel members are also seen by attendees as the decision-makers, even though, in reality, the ultimate decision lies with the agency decision maker. 'Panel members are there to scrutinise the information provided in the paperwork and make a recommendation, rather than interrogate attendees on the day,' says Weekes. 'Panel members need to be supported to recognise the power they have and be guided not to abuse this power.'

Weekes' research also stresses the need to ensure good quality assurance and scrutiny is in place rather than a 'conveyor belt/rubber-stamping of recommendations'.

## Understanding trauma

Many people who have experienced trauma or suffering in their own childhood may seek roles in the caring professions, such as becoming a panel member. 'Awareness needs to be raised about this,' says Weekes. 'An understanding is needed of the potential risks and benefits of early childhood adversity and adult life

experiences, as these are still felt consciously or unconsciously.'

Weekes would like to see all panel members supported to use their life experiences in more effective ways. She explains: 'These adverse experiences are valuable in providing unique insights which can be used empathically in the performance of an individual in their role, as long as the individual concerned is aware of, and can manage, their conscious and unconscious emotions.'

## Key findings

Recommendations from Weekes' research include a far more rigorous recruitment process, to assess their character and mindset, alongside their ability to form and maintain appropriate relationships and personal boundaries, their emotional resilience in working with challenges, and their use of authority and power. She would also like to see transparent contract termination processes and an end to indefinite panel membership terms.

A key outcome is Weekes' conclusion that 'increased personal awareness increases professional effectiveness'. In response, she has developed a process called 'Effective Personal and Professional Judgement' whereby individuals fit in to one of four different quadrants that determine their levels of self-awareness and how this influences how they can contribute effectively. ●

Read more about Dr Weekes' research on our website at [thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/blogs/arlene-weekes](https://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/blogs/arlene-weekes)

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